

# Music wars

By Dean Merrill

A guerrilla skirmish rumbles across our churches and those of other denominations as well. It is not a battle for righteousness or holiness, but instead a struggle over formats and styles, rhythms and volume levels, my way versus your way. Which instruments shall we use? How fast or slow shall we play them? How new or old shall the songs be? Can any good thing come of out of Nashville, or Mobile, or Anaheim, or Australia (or the dusty hymnal)? These questions set off fervent debate.

I love Christian music as passionately as anyone. It can be a powerful catalyst to usher God's people into His presence. It lifted the prophet Elisha out of a bad mood (see 2 Kings 3:14-19) so he could receive a divine word for a beleaguered army. The apostle Paul encouraged us to revel in "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19, NIV).

Then why are we arguing about them so much these days?

Well, music is one of the fine arts, which makes it inherently controversial. Music, painting, sculpture, drama, poetry — they all have few firm *rules* but tons of *preferences*. This

opens up debate about what's good and bad.

We almost never question the *lyrics* of a gospel song, but only its style. When was the last time you heard someone say, "You know, the third line of that new chorus we learned — is it really true? What's the

b i b l i c a l  
basis for  
that c o n c e p t ?"

Instead we consume ourselves with discussions of tempo and beat and whether the melody line is singable. The fact that music is meant to communicate an *idea* gets lost in issues of its format.

Perhaps the reason we are having music wars in the church these days is that we have inadvertently made music more important than it was meant to be. We are placing greater demands upon this slender medium than it can bear. We are insisting, like Goldilocks tasting porridge, that the music must be "just right" (according to me) or else "I can't worship." Should I go along with somebody else's preferences for just a song or two? No way.

God instructed us in the First Commandment, "You shall have no other

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gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). He was talking about more than carved statues. Anything good can be exalted into a god. Whenever we attach too much significance, attention or love to a good thing, it becomes an idol for us. Suddenly, the simple joy is gone. We start arguing. Why? Because this idol is not worthy of worship.

I am amazed at the current obsessiveness about Christian music. When two people meet and happen to mention church, the immediate question is, "What's the worship like at your church? Are you contemporary, or are you more traditional? Do you sing the Hosanna music (or Vineyard, or Brownsville or Hillsong)?"

And for all this attention, we are still largely frustrated. Progressives feel impatient with the slowness of change; traditionalists feel scorned and abandoned. Some churches have thrown up their hands and decided

on an apartheid approach: one service for one group; another service for the other.

Music was never meant to be this obsessive. As long as we keep expecting too much from music, it will keep frustrating us. It is only a means, not an end. It cannot transport the reality of revival from one city to another, for example.

Music is like technology: it makes a wonderful servant but a terrible master. Its purpose is not to make us happy or proud of ourselves; it is rather a language for us to employ in lifting up the Lord. We use it, rather than expecting it to gratify us. Does the carpenter analyze the aesthetic beauty of the screwdriver? No, he puts it to use in making a beautiful

cabinet. What the tool does is far more significant than how it looks.

While once interviewing the pastor of a large church I began asking questions about his congregation's music style, why the Saturday night service differed from the Sunday morning service, etc. He quickly brushed me aside with this overarching summary: "Throughout the whole weekend, we are simply doing one thing: We are gathering to pay attention to God. The ways in which we do that are entirely secondary."

Let us ever remember that we are a church, not a music society. If we keep the main thing the main thing, we won't have time for music wars. We will be too busy exalting the name and honor of Jesus Christ in a needy world. ■

Dean Merrill is a deacon at Living Springs Worship Centre (Assemblies of God), Colorado Springs, Colo., and is the author of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church* (Zondervan).

